Relational and Embodied Social Justice Pedagogies in Social Work

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5 Relational and Embodied Teaching

The Walls to Bridges Program

Background and Description

W2B is a university-based program that brings together college- or university-campus-enrolled and incarcerated students to study together in prisons and jails. The Canadian W2B program is inspired by the Inside-Out Prison Exchange program in the US and has been modified for the different national context and to align with decolonizing anti-racist praxis as articulated in previous chapters of this book. The W2B program was initiated in the Faculty of Social Work in 2011 at Wilfrid Laurier University in Kitchener, Ontario, which housed the national office for over a decade before it was relocated to Indigenous Studies at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. W2B has a specific teaching model premised on integrated and experiential learning, lived experience as a legitimate form of knowledge, and Indigenous-informed circle work.

W2B classes are taught by university and college professors from many different disciplines, including social work, gender studies, sociology, philosophy, English literature, Indigenous studies, criminology, and others. Regardless of the discipline or the course content, the instructor teaches from the W2B philosophy, methods, and processes, which are designed to decolonize conventional education, destigmatize incarcerated people, legitimize lived experience as knowledge, and engage students in reflexive learning and dialogue (Pollack, 2016, 2020).

The program goals of W2B are as follows:

- to build bridges and solidarity with those who are incarcerated and/or criminalized and those who are not;
- to foster integrative learning, involving the whole self – mind, body, emotions, and spirit;
- to recognize the value of the wisdom that comes from lived experience, as well as other sources of learning and knowledge; and
- to create collaborative spaces where critical analysis, dialogue, and self-reflection can open up new insights and dismantle preconceptions.

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Any postsecondary professor can teach a W2B class, but they must first participate in an intensive, five-day instructor training. Instructor trainings take place in a federal women's prison and are facilitated by W2B instructors and incarcerated alumni. The content and process of instructor trainings are experiential, with participants engaging in the same activities that students do when taking a W2B class. This provides instructors with an embodied experience of W2B pedagogies – involving mind, body, emotions, and spirit – and an opportunity to practice facilitating W2B classroom pedagogies and teaching methods. Additional content in the training includes the logistics of establishing a W2B program at their university/college and local jail/prison, navigating power dynamics inherent in partnering with correctional facilities, working with complicated class dynamics, and creating an appropriate W2B course syllabus and evaluation.

Generally, there are equal numbers of university or college students ('outside' students) and incarcerated students ('inside' students) in each class. By virtue of taking place within a prison setting, discussions of power and carceral logics play a role in the class regardless of the course content. A premise underpinning the program is that people with lived experience of incarceration (and other interrelated systems such as family policing, substance abuse treatment, shelters, and psychiatric hospitals) possess epistemological vantage points on the course material that are generally not reflected in academic scholarship. Lived experience is thus put into conversation with social work scholarship and practice knowledge. It is a way of learning that does not privilege dominant perspectives and, because much of the instruction is through circle pedagogy (Graveline, 1998; Hart, 2002), fosters deep listening to others' perspectives.

All students (incarcerated and campus based) apply to participate in the class and are interviewed by the instructor to ensure readiness for this type of innovative experiential learning opportunity. To foster peer-based relationships in class, social work students are told that these classes are not a training ground to "learn to work with" people inside, they are not "helping" the inside students, and it is neither a practicum nor a service-learning experience. All students study together as peers and form a collaborative learning community to explore the course. In order to protect the privacy of incarcerated students, all students use only their first names and outside students are asked to refrain from seeking out information about their inside classmates online or via the media.

Theoretical Foundations: Engaged Pedagogy, Embodiment, and Relational Learning

> Preconceived notions. We are all guilty of harbouring them. Notions of what we think things are supposed to be. Things like prison, and education. Of what and who the student is, and what and who the convict is. These notions have many aliases. They can be called assumptions. Generalizations. Stereotypes. Archetypes. Call them what we may, they are dangerous, for they draw the deep lines, framing the societal and cultural confines which keep us all apart. Which keep us all oppressed. Today, those lines are blurred. No, today they don't exist. Today there is no distinction between student and convict and education and prison . . . because today, right here, we are all students. Learning. Evolving. Erasing. Celebrating.
>
> – Nyki Kish, formerly incarcerated W2B alumni, W2B final ceremony speech, 2011

A Freirean approach to education, especially when teaching in prisons, provides explicit space for marginalized knowledges and to share perspectives on course material that is not necessarily reflected in conventional classrooms and texts. Furthermore, imprisoned people are typically not considered credible "knowers," both because of stereotypes related to people in prison and because prisons operate from the perspective that incarcerated people have problematic thinking patterns and behaviours and cannot be trusted. Creating a classroom comprised of "outside" students and "inside" students, which understands lived experience as an important vantage point from which to approach course material, invites opportunities for rich critical analysis and dialogue.

In alignment with bell hooks' (1994) engaged pedagogy, community building is central to a W2B class. W2B teaching methods recognize and work with differences resulting from being criminalized and imprisoned, in addition to other axes of oppression and privilege. Active community-building activities take place during the first few classes and are integrated through methods of exploring the course material during the semester. Initially, both groups of students are concerned about being judged, with outside students concerned they will be perceived as privileged and spoiled, and inside students concerned they will be perceived as dangerous and stupid (Pollack, 2016). Clearly explaining the overall philosophy of how we will be working together, collaboratively developing community care norms on the second day of class, and intentionally planning for the process of discussing course material that considers power dynamics among students and the instructor, all contribute to the development and care of the learning community.

While W2B classes are experiential learning in that they are engaged in collaborative learning between those who are "free" and those who are "locked up," outside students have the additional experience of learning about prison dynamics. Before beginning the course, outside students are instructed by prison personnel about the rules and regulations of the prison, and upon entering prison each week, are subject to various security measures such as screening, scanning, sniffer dogs, pat downs, and the like. They may also experience arriving at class at the prison and being denied entry because the prison is locked down. While in class, events such as "counts" (when correctional officers enter the room and count all the inside students) are common, highlighting the power dynamics existing in the classroom.

Prisons are embodied places; incarcerated bodies are counted, handcuffed, locked in, and controlled (through, for example, prison-issued clothing, access to food and canteen, and access to culturally specific hair products). Outside students experience a small taste of this as their bodies are scrutinized upon entering the prison, access to bathrooms is controlled by prison staff, and food and drinks are usually not permitted. Moreover, racialized bodies are overrepresented in Canadian prisons, with Indigenous and Black people comprising far more of the prison population than in the general community (Correctional Investigator Canada, 2022). I teach in a social work faculty that is predominantly composed of white students, rendering our W2B classroom a microcosm of the racism and colonialism inherent in both the field of social work and the prison setting. The criminalization of racialized bodies is made evident as soon as we sit in our classroom circle.

In my W2B classes, I invite students to bring their whole selves to the group, including an awareness of how their bodies, minds, emotions, and spirits are responding to the environment and the class discussion. When in circle, drawing on mindfulness strategies, I suggest they listen inward to their physiological responses (assessing if their heart is beating fast, hands are sweaty, face is hot, or they feel tightness in their chest) and be with these sensations, allowing them to pause and become present in their bodies. Such grounding can help foster, as Parker Palmer (2004) calls it, listening to one's "inner teacher," the part of us that resides in our thoughts, emotions, and bodies beneath discourses, norms, expectations, and habits of being. As discussed in Chapter 2, resistance to content on racism, colonialism, whiteness, and sexual/gender identity can be harmful to racialized and queer students and instructors. Inviting students to cultivate body awareness can support the cultivation of reflective, rather than reactive, discussion.

Circle Pedagogy and Deep Listening in W2B

A foundational pedagogical method for W2B is circle pedagogy. W2B has adapted a circle pedagogy that draws on Indigenous ways of learning (Graveline, 1998; Hart, 2002; Kovach, 2009; Penak, 2018; Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021) and from Quaker educator Parker Palmer's (2004) principles of circles of trust. When I teach social work students through W2B, one of my central pedagogical goals is to build community and understanding in ways that do not reflect professionalized social work discourses or personas, or reproduce criminal justice and correctional narratives about faulty cognition, poor choices, condemnation, and pathology. The circle assists both groups of students in challenging their own assumptions and co-creates counternarratives that resist professionalized institutional colonial discourses. This differs from many conventional social work classrooms in which the goal is to teach about social justice and professional practice, including how to "work with" various populations (e.g., criminalized people, immigrants, members

of the queer community, and Indigenous peoples). To ensure that incarcerated peers are not positioned as potential clients or service users – which would reinscribe power differentials and undermine the attempt to study material together as peers – circle learning constructs a space to co-investigate professionalized and other hegemonic discourses from lived experiences and perspectives.

W2B classes are premised on dialogue and listening, a noncombative process that tends to lead to self-reflection on the judgments we hold (e.g., about jails, criminals, privilege, language, and othering processes) and where they come from. Attentive listening, both to others in the circle and to one's own inner thoughts and feelings, is foundational to Palmer's circle of trust approach. In *Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*, Palmer (2004) writes about the circles he facilitates:

> We speak from our own center to the center of the circle – to the receptive heart of the communal space – where what we say will be held attentively and respectfully. This way of speaking differs markedly from everyday conversations in which we speak from our own intellect or ego directly to the intellect or ego of someone on whom we hope to have an impact.
> (p. 188)

Palmer's principle of "speaking from our own center to the center of the circle" is helpful in W2B classes because it allows people to own and share their perspectives without attempting to convince or persuade others. Furthermore, a key principle of Palmer's circle of trust is to avoid "helping, saving, advising or setting each other straight" (p. 114), which assists both students and facilitators to recognize these communicative impulses and encourages reflective rather than reactive speech. In many social justice classrooms and on social media, debate, criticism, calling out, and competition for who is right dominate conversations, often derailing and harming productive exploration of challenging conversations. The commitment to resist the temptation to save, advise, or correct in a social justice classroom, and particularly in a W2B classroom in which power differentials between students can be stark, supports a learning space that allows genuine critical analysis and self-reflection.

In a book chapter about her experiences as a social work student in a W2B class, Amelia Larson (2013) states that "the code of entitled, uninterrupted time to speak for everyone" (p. 67) during a circle process was instrumental in her learning about herself and the course content, and was far more powerful than any other university class she had taken. In her indictment of conventional university education, Larson writes that the W2B class pedagogy made her acutely aware that "while my inside classmates live in cages, I have been educated in one" (p. 64). In particular, she critiqued social work education for discouraging emotions, uncertainty, and vulnerability in the classroom in

favour of disembodied intellectualism. She identified circle pedagogy and its emphasis on listening deeply with an open heart as pivotal to her learning.

Sometimes new (non-Indigenous) W2B instructors have questions about how to effectively support learning through circle pedagogy. A common question is what to do if/when students share hurtful or harmful comments during the circle (such as something that is racist, homophobic, or sexist). Due to the protocol of no interrupting and no cross-talk, there is a concern that circle pedagogy might be harmful if such comments are not addressed in the moment. As social work educators, we are accustomed to addressing microaggressions and other harmful discourse as they occur within the university classroom setting, trying to mediate potential harm. Circle facilitators – or "conductors" to use Indigenous educator Michael Hart's (2002) term – have a responsibility to hold the space and to carefully guide critical reflection. There are times when the conductor will find it necessary to comment after a speaker if someone has broken the circle protocol (Hart, 2002). During their turn in the circle, the conductor is also responsible for summarizing, reflecting, and sharing, and this is a time when concerns may be carefully addressed, without singling out any one particular person's comments.

How Circle Work is Used in W2B Classes

Circle pedagogy may be used in a W2B class to: 1) explore themes/concepts from class readings; 2) process an event that impacts class dynamics or processes (such as correctional officers coming in to count the inside students, or processing a difficult conversation from previous class); 3) facilitate small group work; and 4) develop consensus on some aspect of class (such as details of the class collaborative project).

Class Readings

W2B instructors purposefully select readings to introduce key course ideas and generate robust discussion. Often, required readings are presented in various forms because people tend to learn in different ways, and a W2B class may include students with diverse and varied educational trajectories and levels. For example, in any given class, the required readings may be a combination of theoretical papers, poems, research studies, and/or first-person narratives. A circle process could be used to explore some common themes or concepts raised in the readings. In a discussion on white privilege, for example, students could be asked, "When reading for today's class, what struck you the most about how the authors dealt with the idea of whiteness and colonization?" or "Thinking about the readings, what ideas did you struggle with or react strongly to?" Offering a directed yet open question allows various entry points into the discussion, inviting students to actively reflect on how they personally engaged with the readings rather than being passive consumers of "knowledge." Using

the circle to explore the readings resists a hierarchical ranking of knowledge that creates a scaffolding for debate and attempts to have the right answer or interpretation. Students also gain the opportunity to learn from their peers and instructor as each person shares their thoughts and feelings about the topic.

Process an Event

As group process is integral to how the learning community develops in a W2B class, it is sometimes important to address challenges that occur within the class or from an external event that significantly impacts class members. Circle work is helpful to debrief such events. Because the W2B class takes place within a correctional facility, events such as lockdowns, the inability of inside students to attend class, and other prison-related forces may affect the class in a variety of ways. When planning a W2B semester, instructors often try to have several back-up days in case the prison is locked down and outside students and instructors are not permitted entry. Because of the connections created in the learning community, this type of disruption may require class processing, as both groups of students often have emotional reactions to the uncertainty and lack of contact. Most W2B classes do not have correctional officers in the classroom, although there is usually a staff person close by. It is routine procedure in correctional facilities for people in prison to be counted at designated points throughout the day, and this may occur during a W2B class. It is possible for inside students to be counted in unobtrusive ways (e.g., the prison staff member responsible for the W2B class may be permitted to provide the correctional officer with a list of names of the inside students who are in the class and confirm their presence) or intrusive ways (by interrupting class, calling out the last names of the inside students, and/or asking them to stand). When done intrusively, the ripple effects of the event can be profound and require group processing. Inside students are often startled and taken aback that their outside classmates now know their last names; anonymity is removed, replaced instead by vulnerability. Outside students often feel nervous and uncomfortable about witnessing an event that feels dehumanizing and humiliating. Both groups of students respond with feelings that the sacredness of the circle has been broken, and the creation of a space previously undefined by the "offender"/"nonoffender" dichotomy is damaged. Circle can then be employed to share reactions and repair the disconnection in the group that might have occurred.

Small Group Work

Circle pedagogy can be used in small groups to discuss more in-depth questions about the readings. Typically, the instructor would aim to have equal numbers of inside and outside students in each group so that a variety of lived experiences and perspectives can be brought to the discussion. Some students

feel more comfortable speaking in small groups, and the smaller circle (four to six students) may be conducive to a more thorough exploration of the readings or class topic. Students are asked to take turns speaking with no interruption, to note their internal thoughts, feelings, and bodily reactions, and to practice listening without concern about what they will say when it is their turn. After one or two go-arounds, students can move into a general popcorn-style conversation. Again, the goal is not to have the "right" answer, but to learn from each other's thoughts and reactions – the various ways of engaging with the ideas in the texts.

Decision Making and Consensus

The cornerstone of a W2B class is a collaborative group project developed and executed by the whole class together. Given that inside and outside students do not have any way of contacting one another in between classes (people in prison are not permitted access to email, for example), planning and executing the project must happen during class time. Most people have not had the experience of collaborating with 20–25 people in a way that reflects principles of consensus and collaboration, from the inception of the idea to its completion. Final projects aim to reflect and illustrate key themes from the class and are to involve all students in some way. In some classes, the instructor provides an idea or framework for the students to work within, and in others, the students are free to produce whatever they want. Either way, decision making about the process and content occurs through circle in order to provide all students a voice in the decision making. Given enough time and patience, the process can result in students feeling as though their input was heard and valued and that they can support the resultant decisions.

Class Dynamics

As discussed in Chapter 3, intentional reflection on class dynamics can provide experiential opportunities to practice navigating differences in power and perspectives. There are multiple dimensions to attending to class dynamics in a W2B classroom. In a W2B classroom, the most salient inequality is that half of the class is imprisoned, and the other half is not. This difference in lived experience is, of course, fundamental to the program; many of W2B's values, principles, and teaching practices stem from this inequality. Pedagogically, acknowledging these differences in students' relationships to carceral power provides fertile ground for discussions about how power operates in general, what it feels like to be subjected to it, and how different bodies experience power in different ways. The experiential nature of participants being together in a prison setting yet experiencing it from different vantage points illuminates more broadly how, for example, race, class, gender, (dis)ability,

gender representation, and immigration status significantly influence experiences and perspectives. The conversation about imprisonment can open up many avenues for exploring wider issues of confinement, such as freedom, agency, identity, and power.

Bruce Tuckman's group work theory (Bonebright, 2010) is helpful to think through the rhythm of a W2B class semester. Many W2B classes are full semesters (12 weeks in Canada), but due to various prison-related factors, may also be done in condensed and intensive formats. Either way, Tuckman's stages of group work – forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning – are helpful for tracking the teaching dynamics and corresponding teaching strategies of a typical W2B class.

FORMING

The first several W2B classes include significant time engaging in group-building activities. This is the forming stage, in which participants are getting to know each other and may be tentative and careful about their communication as they work through feelings of uncertainty and distrust. The group-building activities and icebreakers provide a relatively safe way to engage in getting to know one another. In the second class, W2B instructors spend a good deal of time collaboratively working with students to generate community care guidelines that support the creation of a positive learning space. This activity, which may take up to two hours, supports group formation and collective ownership of how students and the instructor will communicate, including issues like confidentiality, dealing with disagreement, identifying what respectful and non-judgemental communication means, body language, and understanding diversity and varied social positionings. Often, these community care guidelines are considered a "live" document that can be added to or edited as the class proceeds.

STORMING

The storming phase refers to the time in the group process when conflicts and disagreements emerge. In a W2B class, storming may occur about midway through the semester, after the class has developed relationships and conversations have moved into deeper social justice content. This is when it can be very useful to return to the community-of-care guidelines for dealing with disagreement. The instructor and/or students may decide to detour from the scheduled content and go into circle to work through some of the tensions that arise. Storming can also re-emerge towards the end of the semester when students are working through their collaborative group project. This may be another opportunity to pause and engage in collective reflection on how students feel the process is going and if any modifications need to be made.

NORMING

Characteristics of the norming phase are collective responsibility for adhering to community-of-care guidelines, familiarity with the process of circle pedagogy, increasing evidence of student leadership, strengthening relationships, and deep engagement with course material.

ADJOURNING

The final group project and the closing ceremony are ways to honour the learning and relationships experienced throughout the semester. It is a time to share the work and experience of the W2B class with invited guests from the prison and university community. In addition to speeches, artwork, performances, and/or circle work, certificates of completion are given at this closing ceremony. Many classes also have an additional private ceremony and circle to share personal reflections on the course as a whole.

Lived Experience as a Legitimate Source of Knowledge

As discussed in Chapter 4, it is important to be thoughtful and intentional when drawing upon lived experiences as sources of knowledge within the context of education, mental health, social services, and corrections. Care must be taken to avoid exploitation and essentialization, and attend to how dominant professional discourses infiltrate and shape lived-experience narratives into something to consume for professional purposes (Costa et al., 2012). People in prison are repeatedly asked to shape their personal stories within correctional frameworks and categories. Correctional discourses and programming are based on cognitive behavioural theory and notions of making bad choices, having criminal thoughts, and, for women, having low self-esteem (Pollack, 2007). Prisoners must explain their pre-prison experiences and their criminal conviction in ways that are legible to the criminal justice system through these frameworks. Furthermore, stories of self must also be articulated through reformation narratives, which often centre the prison as being responsible for a new-and-improved self, no longer a threat to society. As Tiina Eldridge writes about her time in prison:

> After interacting with correctional staff in honest and authentic ways, it did not take me long to figure out the lens through which I was being (un)seen. In my early interactions with staff, I was aiming to be genuine because I knew that I could benefit from accessing real help and support. However, when written reports of these interactions were later shared with me, I saw that my honesty was used to construct me as a horrible person – a risk to society. So I quickly learned to craft my words and my interactions with staff in ways that I wanted them to be documented; I became the manipulative person they were accusing me of being
>
> (Pollack & Eldridge, 2015, p. 135)

As a scholar, I have examined the ways in which criminological and correctional discourses obscure social context and encourage the subjectivity of women in prison as deficient and dependent (Pollack, 2007, 2009, 2010). What drew me to the W2B program was the opportunity to create spaces of critique, exploration, and relationships that allow us all – instructors, prisoners, university students – to move out of the boxes created for us, ironically within a classroom bounded by locked doors and razor wire. While W2B classes respect personal experiences as sources of knowledge, discussions and activities do not encourage the elicitation of crime, reformation, or resilience narratives. Instead, experiences of criminalization and imprisonment are considered an important lens for viewing course content that those without similar experiences might not otherwise have access to. The lived experience of outside students is also harnessed as an important asset to learning and is put into conversation with the academic texts and inside students' perspectives.

Embodied Activities

Embodied activities and expressive arts are often integral to a W2B class. The incorporation of performance arts, spoken word, poetry, drawing, painting, and/or music offers further layers of perspectives and interpretations. As discussed in Pollack and Mayor (2024), one of the foundational W2B activities draws from a branch of Augusto Boal's Image Theatre called frozen images or tableaux.

> In tableaux, students are invited to use their bodies to depict their understanding of various forms of oppression and power (Boal, 1979, 1992). For example, social work students might be invited to create a tableau either on their own or in a small group that demonstrates a concept (e.g., power, ethical responsibility), a social issue (e.g., drug use, anti-Black racism), or a social policy or structure (e.g., United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, prisons). These tableaux would then be shown to the rest of the class, one at a time, while the students are encouraged to call out a word or phrase in response to the instructor's question, "What do you see?" After a few minutes, the instructor would invite students to examine this image from a different perspective (e.g., from the other side of the classroom, from ground level or standing on a chair, taking the position of someone in the sculpture), and answer the question, "Now what do you see?" This literal changing of perspective is then verbally unpacked as a metaphor about how our position in society or within a social structure

> radically impacts our understanding of the topic at hand. It concretizes the truism "where we stand impacts what we see."
>
> (p. 150)

While embodied theatre activities such as this can be powerful for all participants, for incarcerated people whose bodies are constantly subjected to intrusive and punitive gazes and actions, tableaux can be particularly impactful.

Impact of W2B on Student Learning

W2B classes are generally quite impactful for both incarcerated and non-incarcerated students (Larson, 2013; Pollack, 2016; Pollack & Edwards, 2018; Fayter, 2023; Anderson et al., 2023), course instructors (Kilty et al., 2020), and the correctional facilities hosting W2B classes (Pollack & Hutchison, 2018). In 2016, five years after the program began, I conducted an evaluation of the impact of W2B on social work students who took classes at Grand Valley Institution for Women in Kitchener, Ontario.

The study methodology was collaborative and informed by participatory action principles. Incarcerated and non-incarcerated students were involved as both researchers and participants in the study. They were trained in qualitative research skills, co-developed the interview guide, conducted interviews with inside and outside students of W2B classes, and assisted with data analysis. Key findings were that participants reported significant dismantling of stereotypes, experienced circle pedagogy as an equalitarian learning space, and cultivated an enhanced commitment to social action and social change, long after the course was completed (Pollack, 2016).

Inside students spoke of their initial uneasiness about sharing a classroom space with university students and how the class process and teaching methods helped create a comfortable learning space:

> Any fears or stigmas we might have had were brought down. As an inside student, I didn't feel like the outside students were staring at us, like an exhibit in a zoo. They just saw us as other students. They didn't know anything about our cases. They didn't know anything about why we're here. We're just other students working on the same program and discussing the same world issues. It was very liberating to feel a part of the world still – connected, even though we're behind.
>
> (Frances, inside student)

> I felt encouraged and I felt respected, so it made me very comfortable very quickly, and I was very surprised. I felt my voice grew. Like, every class I went to, I had more to say, and I felt comfortable saying it. Whereas, in previous university settings, I rarely spoke and rarely put up my hand, you know what I mean? I was afraid of that competitive aspect, so a lot of things went unsaid. And I never really voiced my opinion.
>
> (Hannah, inside student)

> No one is better than anybody else . . . we were all learning from each other. There was no one person that was like, okay I'm the boss. Nothing like that. It was all equal. It was everyone had their chance to speak and say their opinion on how they felt about the readings or what they had learned or if they had researched something. I really enjoyed it. I'm already going to be judged. I have a criminal record . . . For the people that are from the outside coming in, and for them to be able to look at us in, like, not under any kind of lens – that was really cool.
>
> (Jessica, inside student)

Many outside students (MSW students) spoke about breaking down the dichotomy between "us" and "them" by realizing how much they and the inside students had in common and how their own life trajectory might have also resulted in being criminalized. Caitli's comment typifies this sentiment:

> For the first time [I saw myself] as someone who could quite easily be incarcerated, you know, at the drop of a hat . . . and I really was able to see it for the first time from the perspective of people inside, living in that system. It was life changing.
>
> (Caitli, outside student)

One of the most common statements about the impact of W2B was how circle pedagogy broke down hierarchies of knowledge by inviting whole self learning, bridging academic scholarship, personal experiences, and emotions.

> You did the academic work kind of before class, but then actually in class was connecting . . . kind of drawing a link between the academics with what's real life. And people's personal experiences, and their emotions, and what they've lived through.
>
> (Grace, outside student)

> I felt that, having the circle format, I was able to listen to different people and learn from different people. And there's still the leader and sort of setting the format, but it really opened up to everybody as teachers and everybody as learners, and I really liked that.
>
> (Beth, outside student)

Applications of W2B Pedagogy to University and Community-Based Learning Settings

Universities often have strategic plans that involve a commitment to civic engagement and, in Canada, to Indigenization. Providing access to disadvantaged populations and/or those who have non-traditional educational trajectories is consistent with these types of university commitments. Many aspects of the W2B model are transferable to traditional postsecondary social

work classrooms – community-building activities, lived experience as expertise, deep listening and circle work, and expressive arts – as well as to other community-based settings. W2B classes, for example, have been facilitated in halfway houses and addiction treatment centres, with students from the universities attending on-site with those who are in residence at these facilities. Additional sites such as domestic violence shelters, Indigenous healing lodges, mental health facilities, and assisted living units may also provide powerful opportunities for W2B classes.

Elements of W2B pedagogy can be easily transferred to more conventional university-based classrooms – something I and other W2B-trained instructors often do. The social justice pedagogies help to shift from a hierarchical, colonial style of learning to collaborative and experiential approaches. In this way, W2B classes may be more demanding as students are required to take on more responsibility for participation and class direction, being physically, emotionally, and intellectually present and responsible for the care of the learning community. At a foundational level, this social justice teaching method challenges the norms, assumptions, and discourses of not only criminal justice systems but of Western institutional education as a whole.

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Concluding Thoughts

When I completed my PhD in 2000, I taught some classes at a university in a large urban centre. Well over half the students in my courses were racialized, from a variety of backgrounds. Teaching social justice content in this context resulted in a wide array of discussions, including the impact of racism, poverty, policing, and colonialism on the students' lives. It was when I began a tenure-track position in a mid-size city, an hour and a half from the large urban centre, that I started feeling unease about the teaching methods used in social work classrooms. In a predominantly white classroom, common teaching methods such as self-reflexivity on whiteness, identifying personal values, and power dynamics between service users and social workers get heard and explored through the lenses of whiteness and heteronormativity in particular ways. Over the years, racialized students have told me of the harms, frustration, and anger inherent in having to listen to their peers fret about white guilt and feeling debilitated, often expressed through tears. As many racialized and Indigenous social work scholars have pointed out, the core social work curriculum speaks to an imagined white social worker. Not only does this raise serious questions about the educational needs of racialized and other minoritized students not being met, but the harms done in our classrooms in the name of social justice (Lerner & Kim, 2024b).

While nowhere near a panacea, in my experience, the pedagogical theories and practices explored in this book significantly change how social justice issues are discussed and develop a stronger learning community. Working with circle and embodied pedagogies requires attention to others and personal introspection (much of this does not need to be verbally expressed in the classroom) – the deep *listening* allows deep *learning*. Much of the content I teach remains the same; I continue to draw upon anti-racist feminism, abolitionism, and Indigenous epistemologies as methods for developing a critical social work praxis. Yet reorienting my attention to providing opportunities to practice the concepts we are studying (such as anti-racist praxis, non-performative allyship, relational accountability, and abolitionist praxis), rather than only reading or talking about them, has significantly changed my teaching methods and style. I have become a more authentic educator; *the clothes fit the body*.

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